

Gerard Road Rehabilitation and Fuels Reduction Environmental Assessment

EA#OR134 -FY02-15

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Spokane District is proposing to rehabilitate .75 mile of road located on the west side of Salmon Creek, along the east facing slope of Arlington Ridge, and burn selected piles of woody debris remaining from a previous, private timber sale. The road is located about 11 miles northwest of the town of Okanogan in Okanogan County, northcentral Washington, T35 N, R 25E S32 (see Map 1). This area is in the Okanogan Management Area of the Spokane District's Wenatchee Resource Area.

Purpose and Need

The existing road was poorly constructed and is currently eroding into Salmon Creek at a rapid rate. The road, in its current condition, also represents a safety hazard to anyone in a vehicle attempting to traverse it due to the slides that have occurred and the steepness of the grade. In addition to the road, there are excess slash piles along the road remaining from a private timber sale that occurred before BLM acquired the property. This slash represents a fire hazard to the area.

Background

This property was recently acquired by the BLM in a land exchange. These previous owners recently completed a timber sale in the area and the Gerard road was used as a haul road for removing timber from that harvest unit.

Description of Alternatives

Alternatives have been developed to address the management issues identified in the Purpose and Need section above. Each of the alternatives analyzed are described in detail below.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action)

This alternative consists of the following actions:

- 1) Burn the slash piles left along the road from the previous timber harvest activities
- 2) Spray weeds invading the area from previous ground disturbances
- 3) Construct water bars along the road to disperse surface water runoff and prevent erosion
- 4) Rip sections of the road to loosen soil and seed with native grasses
- 5) Repair small areas of land slides along the road
- 6) Close the road with a gate to prevent public access and safety concerns

Alternative 2 (No Action)

This alternative would consist of leaving the road in its present condition. This alternative does not rule out the possibility of working on the road at some point in the future.

Management Actions/Project Design Features Common to Alternatives

Resource Inventories

Cultural surveys will be conducted prior to implementing the project. If cultural resources are located in the project area during project implementation, the project will be redesigned to avoid impacting the site. If the site cannot be avoided, consultation will be conducted with the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation and the Colville Confederated Tribes. If cultural remains are encountered during project implementation, the disturbing activity will be halted, the authorized BLM official will be contacted, and the resource protected until a BLM archaeologist has assessed the historic significance of the resource.

Noxious Weed and Invasive Plants

Invasive weeds will be treated or controlled using chemical or biological methods, as needed and according to the *Final EIS for Vegetation Treatment on BLM Lands in Thirteen Western States* dated July 1991, the Spokane District Noxious Weed Control Environmental Assessment, and any subsequent updates, revisions, or replacements to either of these documents.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation will be done in accordance with the Spokane District Monitoring Plan.

- A fisheries biologist will monitor the project for erosion into Salmon Creek
- A fuels specialist will monitor the burning projects for reduced fire danger
- An engineering specialist will monitor the gate construction and road repairs for meeting technical specifications.

Other Alternatives Considered But Not Analyzed in Detail

Consideration was given to repairing the road to a serviceable condition that would be safe for public use. This action would require extensive construction and there is no funding available to accomplish this. In addition, there is no need for the road since it does not lead to any land that requires public access.

Affected Environment & Environmental Impacts

Soils

The soils along the road are coarse granitics that are subject to erosion and mass wasting. Alternative 1 (proposed) would greatly reduce the erosion of soils coming off of the road surface. The proposed water bars would also reduce the potential for landslides and major gully erosion. The gates would prevent vehicle related soil disturbances that lead to erosion.

Alternative 2 (no action) would result in considerable surface erosion and gully erosion over time with an increased potential for soil disturbance due to off-road vehicle tracks.

Water/Fisheries

Salmon Creek is a historical spring Chinook and steelhead tributary to the Okanogan River. Salmon Creek currently has a rainbow trout population. The Okanogan Irrigation District (OKID) diversion dam, (4 miles from the confluence) has been altered by the BOR to allow adult steelhead passage over the dam during average spring runoff years. The Colville Confederated Tribes have done stream surveys identifying some of the best potential steelhead spawning areas in upper Salmon Creek as being on or near the BLM sections.

The proposed water barring project on the steep areas of the Gerard road (Alternative 1) will reduce runoff and sediment transport to Salmon Creek. Some slash adjacent to the road acts as a sediment filter holding the soils in place and will be retained.

Alternative 2 (no action) will result in additional sediment being deposited into Salmon Creek, possibly having an adverse affect on downstream spawning areas and water quality over time.

Special Status Species

Salmon Creek has the potential for ESA listed Mid Columbia steelhead to naturally spawn above the OKID diversion dam. Alternative one and two will have no adverse affects on this steelhead population.

Vegetation

The area is forested Douglas-fir habitat with ponderosa pine trees in patches. Much of the hillside also consists of grassland openings with patches of brush such as snowberry. Because of recent soil disturbance there are a few weeds such as Dalmation toadflax, diffuse knapweed, and Canadian thistle along the road, with the potential for much greater populations in the future. Alternative 1 would reduce weed populations along the road and lessen the potential for weeds spreading into the surrounding hillside and displacing native vegetation.

Alternative 2 would not control weeds along the road, increasing the potential for weed spread into native vegetation.

Special Status Species

There are no special status plant species on the road because of extensive soil disturbance. If there were any special status plant species on the hillside adjacent to the road, they would not be affected by either alternative.

Wildlife Habitat

The habitats along this road are common wildlife habitats throughout the central Washington foothills. Mule deer and black bear are the primary big game species in the area. Alternative 1 would cause some noise disturbance, which could temporarily displace some wildlife sensitive to noise such as black bear and golden eagles. There are no affects on habitat from this alternative since activities would be confined to disturbed areas.

Alternative 2 would not disturb any wildlife species, but habitats in the area could be slightly degraded by the spread of weeds from the road area to surrounding habitats since weeds would not immediately be treated under this alternative.

Special Status Species

A biological assessment found that no species listed as threatened, endangered, or proposed under the Endangered Species Act that would be in any way impacted by activities proposed in Alternative 1 or Alternative 2.

Recreation

Recreational uses in the area consist primarily of hunting and camping. The road is not presently passable with a vehicle and therefore is not being used except at the lower levels of the road before it begins to climb the hillside. Alternative 1 would eliminate about .25 mile of vehicle access, but foot or horseback uses would still be available. Alternative 2 would keep the present levels of access, but also keeps the existing safety hazard created by recreationists attempting to use the road. The lack of turn-around areas on the road requires drivers to undertake the unsafe act of backing down a steep portion of the road after discovering they cannot drive farther.

Cultural/Paleontological Resources

There is the potential for cultural or paleontological resources in the area because of the long period of historic mining and Indian use of the area. Alternative 1 has some potential to disturb these resources because of the heavy equipment use associated; therefore, a qualified archaeologist will do a predisturbance survey before project activities are initiated. Alternative 2 would not affect these resources.

Mineral/Energy

Mineral potential in the area is high because of the history of mining, and there are no known energy resources. Alternative 1 or 2 would not affect these resources or the potential to extract them. The area has been mined extensively in the past and most easily accessible resources were removed, primarily gold.

Socioeconomic

The socioeconomic climate of the area is slightly depressed at the present time. Alternative 1 would provide a small economic stimulus to the area by using a local heavy equipment contractor to accomplish project activities. Alternative 2 would have no affect on local socioeconomic conditions.

Air Quality

Air quality in the area is presently excellent except when a wildfire is burning nearby. Alternative 1 would produce a small amount of smoke from burning slash piles. Some of this smoke may filter down into the valley where a few residences exist. There is a high probability that there would be very little smoke released into the valley, because 1) burning would likely occur during periods when some wind would be available to disperse the smoke, 2) atmospheric pressure would allow for rising smoke, and 3) the total amount of fuels to be burned is relatively small. Alternative 2 would have no affects on air quality.

Other Resource Elements Analyzed

Environmental Justice: No disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority or low-income populations are expected to result from implementation of any of the alternatives addressed in this EA.

Critical Elements That Were Considered: The following resources were considered, but determined to be either not present or are not expected to be impacted.

- Wild and scenic rivers
- Prime/unique farmlands
- Floodplain
- Wastes (Hazardous or Solid)
- Special area designations (including Areas of Critical Environmental Concern)
- Wilderness
- Energy and minerals resources or their development
- Migratory birds

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulatively, the BLM may be conducting other future land management and road improvement projects in the area, since the BLM has recently acquired other properties in the Salmon Creek area that may need management action. In the recent past, timber sale and slash treatments have been conducted by the BLM on Arlington Ridge west of the project area related to the Salmon Creek Timber Sale.

Coordination/Consultation With Other Agencies, Groups and Individuals

The EA will be placed on the Spokane District Webpage at www.or.blm.gov/spokane for public review with a 2-week comment period, to end July 16, 2002.